

# Medal of Valor presented to Oso mudslide communities

By [Jerry Cornfield](#)  
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Mark Mulligan / The Herald

OLYMPIA — There were tears, smiles and — thanks to a logger named Quinn Nations — a touch of politics Wednesday as Darrington, Oso, Arlington and the Sauk-Suiattle tribe received the state Medal of Valor for [selfless and heroic actions](#) in response to the deadly [Oso mudslide](#).

Washington Supreme Court Chief Justice Barbara Madsen presented the awards to representatives of the communities during a joint session of the state House and Senate.

The awards were accepted by Fire Chief Willy Harper on behalf of the town of Oso, Nations on behalf of the town of Darrington, high school student Brantly Stupey for the city of Arlington and volunteer firefighter Kevin Lenon for the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe.

Nations was among loggers who went into the mud to rescue victims in the initial hours after the March 22, 2014, slide near Oso, despite danger and warnings by law

enforcement officers.

In accepting the award, he hinted at their defiant mood with a quote from longtime resident Steve Skaglund.

“Look what the American people can do if you just untie their hands,” Nations said, inciting a roar from Republicans, Democrats and his family, friends and neighbors in the gallery. “Chew on that one for a little bit.”

Afterward, Nations elaborated only slightly on what seemed to be a reference to frustration some residents felt at being barred from helping in the first hours and days after the mudslide.

“What better statement could be made to express the feelings?” he said. “Small people are capable of great things if they get mad enough.”

Wednesday's ceremony lasted less than an hour and featured brief comments from each of the four.

Brantly is a 14-year-old freshman at Arlington High School. A year ago he attended Post Middle School, which is where the Red Cross set up an emergency shelter. Brantly was among students who worked tirelessly to round up donations and assist the operation. He also invited Gov. Jay Inslee to the school to speak, and the governor did visit.

“It is through this great tragedy, like all great tragedies, that challenge the human spirit,” Brantly said in his remarks. “Such a thing brings out the best in all of us. For this reason, and through the strength, resiliency and love of our community, we have remained undaunted. The battle for healing is ongoing, but through continued unity, in time all will heal.”

As he spoke, Post Middle School Principal Voni Walker watched from the gallery as Brantly held the attention of lawmakers and guests.

“I think more than anything I felt pride in our youth,” she said. “They really represent Arlington and they are our future.”

Harper, one of the first emergency responders at the scene, told lawmakers that a long recovery is still ahead “but we wouldn't be where we are at today without all the community members who stepped up.”

Lenon, vice chairman of the Sauk-Suiattle tribal council, is a volunteer firefighter with the Darrington Fire Department. He was on the scene the first day and, much like Nations, spent hours in the mud alongside others, searching for survivors in spite of threats to their safety.

“We dedicate this honor you have bestowed on us to the lives lost, to those who worked

diligently to save lives and to those who recovered the ones who suffered death,” Lenon said. The tribe is committed, he said, to building a “healthy, human spirit” in the Stillaguamish Valley.

The Medal of Valor is one of the highest civilian honors awarded by the state. Since its establishment in 2000, it has only been given to eight people, the last in 2007.

Wednesday marked the first time it went to communities and a tribe. It took a new law to do so. Until this year only individuals could receive the award.

Sen. Kirk Pearson, R-Monroe, and state Reps. Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish, and Elizabeth Scott, R-Monroe, nominated the communities and shepherded the bill to passage.

“It’s emotional,” Pearson said. “You can’t help but think about last year. It’s great to bring the communities together and show how strong and resilient they are.”

Kristiansen said the ceremony was an opportunity to remember residents’ “amazing acts of valor ... and amazing acts of love.”

While it was a joyful moment, he said of the event, “it was a very difficult moment.”

Also Wednesday, the governor presented the Medal of Merit to Gretchen Schodde and posthumously to Billy Frank Jr.

Frank, who died in May, was honored for his work as a Nisqually tribal leader and for his dedication to the plight of Northwest salmon, the environment and peace among diverse cultures. Frank’s sons, Willie and Tobin Frank, accepted the medal on his behalf.

Schodde, a resident of Union in Mason County, received the award for her work as founder of Harmony Hill Retreat Center. The center in Union offers a range of support for individuals and families affected by a cancer diagnosis.

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